

## ‘DestroyedMichygen’: re-routing the postnational in contemporary diaspirant fiction

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Title - ‘DestroyedMichygen’: Re-Routing the Postnational in Contemporary Diaspirant Fiction

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‘Across the country, this classic immigrant story is playing itself out, the story of ambition and adaptation, hard work and education, assimilation and upward mobility. Today’s immigrants, however, are living out this story in hyperdrive. As beneficiaries of a nation more tolerant and worldly than the one immigrants faced generations ago, a nation that has come to revere its immigrant myth, they are more confident in their place here, more assertive of their rights.’

(Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope* 260)

‘Whatever our view of what we do, we are made by the forces of people moving about the world.’

(Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* 3)

On 28th July 2015, Barack Obama became the first U.S. president to address the African Union. In his speech, Obama heralded an ‘Africa on the move ... a new Africa emerging’ (Obama, ‘Remarks’ 2015). In what follows, I argue that three novels published during his tenure can be productively read using his ‘immigrant stories in hyperdrive’ formulation. To probe the possibilities, as well as limitations of this interpretative frame, I explore the ways in

which NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013), Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.* (2014) and Dinaw Mengestu's *How to Read the Air* (2010), demythologise a cluster of twenty-first century American dreams. In doing so, they offer reconfigurations of established tropes in diasporic literature. Chief amongst them are the postcolonially-canonised dialectic of routes and roots filtered through the all-American prism of the road, as well as its associated mythos in an Obama-era imaginary. Given that all three are preoccupied with the complex, often inter-generational traffic, both physical and psychical, between East, West and Southern Africa nations and the United States, I am also interested in how they might be read through what I call a 'diaspirancy' paradigm. I propose this neologism as it yokes together those concerns with diasporic negotiations and aspirational discourses so central to Obama's *Dreams from My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope*, as captured by the privileging of adaptation and upward mobility in the opening epigraph. Crucially, however, it also suggests some of the more dystopian inflections of my chosen novels.

Before fleshing out 'diaspirancy', as well as its links with the theme of this special issue, it is necessary to offer a word on my title. 'DestroyedMichygen' is taken from a chapter in *We Need New Names* (Bulawayo 147). It is provocative for my purposes as it invites us to reconsider the sort of open-ended debates about Afrocentric postnational discourses and cultures gestured towards by Francis Ngaboh-Smart. For him, 'the postnational obsession with the dissolution of the nation and national forms of identification raises more questions than [it] answers' (Ngaboh-Smart 148). A return to a seminal issue of *boundary2* also suggests how transposing some of these debates can inform scholarly practice in what has been called a more recognisably 'postcolonial, postnational global context' (Oboe and Bassi 3). In his introduction, with its avowed focus on then contemporary American literary studies, editor Donald Pease argued that '[p]ostnational forces understand every social category as the ongoing antagonism between internalized models and external forces.

As such, they are productive of an internal divide (the contamination of the excluded/external), whereby the structures underwriting the stability of the national narrative can undergo transformations' (Pease 5). In what follows, I consider how Pease's attention to antagonisms, internal divisions and transformations of national narrative can be put to work in a context where texts concerned with the ongoing negotiations of migrants from the African continent to the twenty-first century U.S. have proliferated. To do so, I examine the distinctive ways in which writers such as Bulawayo, Ndibe and Mengestu are speaking back to Pease's interventions in more contemporaneously worldly terms to refine and contest the paradigm of 'Africa' as exclusively postnational space. They do so by establishing a more productive, because contestatory counterpoint between their African and American spaces. Brief synopses of all three novels give a sense of these shared preoccupations.

Ellah Allfrey's *Guardian* review provides a helpful impression of *Foreign Gods Inc.*:

At the point we meet Ike [Ndibe's protagonist], he is a man of small dreams and limited ambition living in a city [New York] that cares little for failure or mediocrity. Once a promising student, the reality of life as an immigrant has ground him down ... Unlikely though it may seem, Ike sees [stealing Ngene, a god from his local village, Utonki] as the best way out of his situation. He will make a fortune by selling Ngene to the [Foreign Gods Inc.] gallery, he persuades himself, and then he will be able to buy that slice of America that he has so far been denied. (Allfrey, 2013)

Equally enabling is Miguel Syjuco's *New York Times*' sketch of *How to Read the Air*:

[Mengestu's] story is narrated by Jonas Woldemariam, a young Ethiopian-American whose freshly failed marriage to a woman named Angela leads him away from Manhattan. He hits the road, seeking to understand the one traversed decades ago by his parents, Yosef and Mariam, from eastern Africa to the American Midwest. Jonas

unites the disconnected lives of the four characters, weaving his parents' elusive émigré story into the certainties of his own. In alternating chapters, we see Yosef and Mariam, Jonas and Angela, as couples bearing baggage, literally and metaphorically. (Syjuco 2010)

Whereas *Foreign Gods Inc.* and *How to Read the Air* focus on figures who have already relocated to the States and/or are hyphenated citizens, *We Need New Names* maps out the process of such transnational dislocations by foregrounding its Afrocentrism from the outset. The novel traces the fortunes of protagonist and narrator Darling, from her formative experiences in the fictional Zimbabwean township of Paradise, where she dreams of America in all its globalizing glory, to her U.S. relocation to live with her Aunt Fostalina. While a host of commentators have had their oft-provocative say on the novel (see, for example, Habila 2013 and Allfrey 2013) an alternative entry into *We Need New Names* emerges by returning to Obama's 2015 A.U. address.

In January 2015, a ninety-year-old Robert Mugabe was elected head of the African Union. As Obama joked about his own greying hair, questioning why anyone would want to stay in office beyond two terms, those watching on might have been reminded of a key moment from Bulawayo's debut novel. In it, she reimagines the media spectacle of Obama's election through the lens of Darling's own transition from Zimbabwe to the U.S.: '[o]n TV that pretty man Obama who has been saying, Yes We Can, America, Yes We Can, is becoming president. He does not look old like our own president; he looks maybe like our president's child' (Bulawayo 156). Having spent much of the early sections of the narrative sketching out a Zimbabwean reality marked by hyperinflation, the razing of settlements and the reappropriation of property in a way that both resonates with and supplements texts such as Petina Gappah's *An Elegy for Easterly* (2009) and *The Book of Memory* (2015), Darling's

narrative changes gear in its more U.S.-centered second half (see Krishnan 168-169). Crucially, this augments rather than displaces the postnational tensions of its opening, where Madonna and Lady Gaga compete with Osama and Obama in the fame game that is the globalized American imaginary. As beseeching letters from home are replaced by phone-calls, e-mails, Skype, texts and Facebook updates, the immediacy of those identitarian negotiations, captured in the contested concepts of 'stayee' and 'returnee' so central to authors from Nuruddin Farah to Taiye Selasi, is amplified (see Masterson 2013 and Moolla 2014). Darling's attempts to understand such entanglements, in Nuttall's sense of 'a relationship or set of social relationships that is complicated, ensnaring, in a tangle, but which also [imply] a human foldedness,' connect media and identity scapes in a manner that recalls the often painful process by which she is forced to demythologize North American space (Nuttall 1). Crucially, such interrogations are also set against the backdrop of her own longing for Paradise. This in turn calls the transatlantic ubiquity of the postnational paradigm into question.

The first mention of Darling's aspirational new homeland, captured by 'DestroyedMichygen,' comes immediately after her description of the 'country-game,' which in turn relies on the kinds of trans and postnational taxonomies interrogated throughout this special issue. Read in light of Grexit and Brexit debates, however, the stability of the nominated 'country-countries' is shown to be more precarious than Darling and her friends imagine:

we have to fight over the names because everybody wants to be certain countries, like everybody wants to be the U.S.A. and Britain and Canada and Australia and Switzerland and France and Italy and Sweden and Germany and Russia and Greece and them. These are the country-countries. If you lose the fight, then you just have to settle for countries like Dubai and South Africa and Botswana and Tanzania and

them. They are not country-countries, but at least life is better than here. Nobody wants to be rags of countries like Congo, like Somalia, like Iraq, like Sudan, like Haiti, like Sri Lanka, and not even this one we live in – who wants to be a terrible place of hunger and things falling apart? (Bulawayo 49)

If the Achebe allusion is a little overdetermined, such sections are more suggestive when framed by Ngaboh-Smart's consideration of failed states sucked into a postnational vortex. Darling lays imaginary claim to the U.S. in the following terms: 'who doesn't know [it] is the big baboon of the world? I feel like it's my country now because my aunt Fostalina lives there, in Destroyedmichygen' (Bulawayo 49). While Bulawayo appears to follow a familiar trajectory, in which the Obama-endorsed 'diaspirant' hopes of assimilation and upward mobility are dashed on arrival, the manner in which she invites the reader to construct their own counterpoints between Zimbabwe (as nation) and North America (as continent) suggests how a more enabling, because potentially more postnationally-inflected dialogue might develop. The impact of Darling's description of the haunted faces of those betrayed by the promises of Zimbabwean electoral reform, for example, is only really felt when the reader comes to terms with the American portions of the narrative. In both instances, we are obliged to reflect on the ways in which different kinds of dream have been abandoned: '[w]hen you look into their faces it's like something that was in there got up and gathered its things and walked away' (Bulawayo 135).

At such moments, which pepper the narrative, the reader is hailed as cultural and conceptual translator. If these reflections follow the familiarly Afropessimist trajectory parodied in Binyavanga Wainaina's 'How to Write about Africa,' they also offer Obama-era counterpoints to his celebratory sense of identitarian 'cross-pollination' (Obama, *Audacity* 51). As the reality of racial prejudice and the quotidian violence of high-school shootings hints at a more precarious border separating 'developed' and 'developing' worlds,

comparative readers are invited to reconceptualise Obama's attempts to revive shattered dreams of what Amy Kaplan calls a 'still resistant paradigm of American exceptionalism' (Kaplan and Pease 11). As Darling's narrative undercuts this, it evinces Kaplan and Pease's sense that literature provides a stage upon which these postnational tensions and struggles are played out, rather than resolved. This is once again represented by Darling's enduring sense that, while she may have left Paradise, it has not left her.

An example comes when Bulawayo reflects on the hegemonic myth of America as sanctuary for those fleeing geo-political collapse by figuring Darling as diasporic intermediary. Before she sacrifices herself to cyber communication, she relies on letters home. In the course of this authorial apprenticeship, Darling quickly learns the value of strategic concealment. She omits to mention, for instance, that 'the house we lived in wasn't even like the ones we'd seen on TV when we were little, how it wasn't made of bricks but planks, a house made of planks in America.' She continues 'I didn't tell them how in the summer nights there sometimes was the bang-bang-bang of gunshots in the neighbourhood ... how there were poor people who lived on the streets, holding up signs to beg for money. I left out these things, and a lot more, because they embarrassed me, because they made America not feel like My America, the one I had always dreamed of back in Paradise' (Bulawayo 187-188). The childish optimism of the country-game is replaced by the splintering acceptance, as captured in the metonymic 'house of planks' image, that, no matter how comforting the Zimbabwean version of an Obama-era American Dream may have been, her new 'home' will always be 'unhomely.' This corresponds with a broader conceptual sense that the 'world *is* "home" only in so far as it allows each of its citizens to find a place that may contain their future' (Oboe and Bassi 9).

While this covers familiar territory in terms of the postcolonial diasporic literature that circulates and is consumed by predominantly Western readers, such reflections assume



greater significance when considered in light of the kinds of discourse that have traditionally dogged pan-African debates about postnationalism. As Adekeye Adebajo points out, Obama has also had recourse to abortive state rhetoric on high-profile occasions: '[t]he African references in Obama's [2009] Nobel speech also perpetuated negative stereotypes of the continent, with the Kenyan-Kansan referring to Somalia as a 'failed state' of terrorism, piracy and famine, as well as talking of genocide in Darfur, rape in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and repression in Zimbabwe (though referring to the bravery of its citizens)' (Adebajo 13). When compared to the celebratory 'Yes, We Can' speeches so central to *We Need New Names*, the suggestion is that America is synonymous with movement and progress, whereas 'Africa,' a multivalent continent reduced to an imagined country, is a metonym for stagnation and stasis. As suggested by his 2015 A.U. address, however, Obama tailors his rhetoric to the demands and desires of his audience. If his Nobel speech pre-empts the kind of reductive, child's play logic relied on by Darling and her friends in the country-game, Obama has also shown an ability to knowingly defamiliarize archetypes, including 'this land of warring factions and tribal hatreds' (Obama, *Audacity* 25). In reclaiming such tag-lines from the thirty-second news-bite on the African continent and its woes, symptomatic as they are of 'the neoliberal impulse to telescope context into slogan,' Obama deploys it to offer a critique of the U.S. Congress' often intractable partisan politics (Krishnan 134). This form of rhetorical oscillation, between Afropessimism (also see Obama, *Audacity* 319) and a desire to forge transnational connections in ways variously playful and political, underpins many of the core concerns, as well as formal experiments, of *We Need New Names*. When seen through this lens, Darling's reflections provide a sobering supplement to Habila's attack on Bulawayo for pandering to the voyeurism of Western media consumers obsessed with third world poverty-porn.

My contention, therefore, is that *We Need New Names* is as concerned with the mediatization of often spectacular violence in the U.S., as a corollary to the puncturing of various diasporant dreams of social mobility and progress, as it is with the ways in which photo- and other journalists capture the darker realities of certain seemingly disposable lives in Zimbabwe's townships. Rather than read these reflections in bifurcated terms of African or North American continents, Bulawayo urges her readers to consider them in relation to the kinds of debates suggested by the eating disorder that affects the daughter of Darling's boss, as well as the description of her cousin who enlists for the 'war on terror' when she is in the U.S. While Ngaboh-Smart's sense that 'African nations will have to restructure their definition and management of citizenship and sovereignty to meet the challenges posed by ... emerging models of identification' still holds, readers of these third rather than second generation writers are invited to re-route such statements via debates about the American nation(s) as postnational space (Ngaboh-Smart 153). By restaging these through their fiction, Bulawayo, Ndibe and Mengestu variously explore the possibilities, as well as necessities, of privileging what Kaplan, paraphrasing Toni Morrison, sees as 'a more profound and unsettling intimacy' between African and American spaces (Kaplan and Pease, 5). As they urge their readers to consider how these more nuanced postnational dialogues might come into being, they also invite us to resist the hegemonic notion that it is only 'Africa' and/or 'the Global South' that are tasked with restructuring definitions, as well as managing citizenship and sovereignty. Given recent migrant crises, now, more so than ever, these challenges spill across (post)national borders.

In light of the above, I suggest Bulawayo's often satirical exploration of American exceptionalism, advertising itself through the supposedly equal opportunities to perpetually self- and re-fashion so central to the proposed 'diasporancy' paradigm, can be framed by Obama's assertion that,

[i]n every society (and in every individual), these twin strands – the individualistic and the communal, autonomy and solidarity – are in tension, and it has been one of the blessings of America that the circumstances of our nation’s birth allowed us to negotiate these tensions better than most ... the sheer size of the continent, vast tracts of land and abundant resources ... allowed new immigrants to continually remake themselves (Obama, *Audacity* 55).

When figured in relation to what he elsewhere describes as ‘the political firestorm surrounding immigration’, as incendiary then as now, Obama’s final reference assumes added piquancy (Obama, *Audacity* 249). The fundamental tensions between the diaspirant desire to claim certain spaces, while simultaneously feeling excluded from them, undercut such effusive declarations throughout these three very different texts. It also suggests that, while Bulawayo, Ndibe and Mengestu can be read through various postnational filters, their respective protagonists all cling, however tenuously, to their versions of a place once called home. In short, Zimbabwean, Nigerian and Ethiopian nations do persist in these texts. Arguably, however, the characters who populate them share a qualified desire to see different versions of them come into being. Crucially, this extends to the more American meditations in all three. Traversing Westnedge with her new friends, for instance, Darling has a profoundly defamiliarizing experience of movement. Her feeling of being in control of her own destiny, however illusory, contrasts with the profound regulation of her earlier life in Paradise. As such, her Kalamazoo reflections appear in thrall to the diaspirant appetite, however utopian, to reinvent the self along liberatory routes, rooted as they are in an all-American fetishization of asphalt: ‘because we are going where we want and we are in charge, it feels different driving through the city, like maybe everything we see is ours, like we built it all’ (Bulawayo 218). This possessive desire recalls, as it recoils from, the earlier, demythologising reality of the ‘house of planks.’

Bulawayo's structural decision to buttress the 'like we built it all' with other road-bound reflections is crucial. In the following, for instance, Darling's attempts to plot her own co-ordinates in relation to a shifting sense of home rely on the road as multiply-loaded metonym. It signals both limitation and the ambiguous sense that, were it taken, it could result in freedom or frustration. Either way, she senses it will not deliver any real sanctuary: '[t]he road that divides our house from the cemetery is a smooth belt, and I always wonder where exactly it would end if I followed it. In America, roads are like the devil's hands, like God's love, reaching all over, just the sad thing is, they won't really take me home' (Bulawayo 191). When seen in relation to burgeoning discourses on a postnationalism that cannot be divorced from contemporary manifestations of neo-imperialism, such images of amorphous expansion carry additional weight. As conceptions of this new U.S. home are filtered through postnational paradigms previously associated with Zimbabwe, they once more become unhomey in a manner that problematizes Obama's epigraphical sense that new arrivants to America's shores feel more secure than ever in these increasingly globalized environs.

One of the most striking moments in Darling's incremental understanding of what the price of U.S. diaspirant dreams might be comes when she confronts the eye-watering cost of a car. Having nurtured dreams of speed as totemic of the kind of long-desired upward mobility privileged by Obama, her aspirations are razed in a manner that recalls the earlier descriptions of 'clearances' in *Paradise*. In the following, Darling shifts from what appears to be a quotidian fiscal reality-check to a profound decentring of the conceptual significance of America itself: 'I don't want to say with my own mouth that if the car costs that much then it means I'll never own it, and if I can't own it, does that mean I'm poor, and if so, what is America for, then?' (Bulawayo 225). If Darling's conception of the U.S. as postnational Zimbabwean sanctuary is punctured in a manner that recalls the 'bang-bang-bang' of high-

school shootings, her subsequent depiction of it as a patchwork of something like discrete nations once more explodes her childhood sense of America as merely a ‘country-country.’ It is once again revealing that her attempts to plot such an alternative cartography privilege tropes of roads and driving: ‘[we] had never seen such a big monster of a country – it was like there were many countries in it: Michigan, Texas, New York, Atlanta, Ohio ... We went to places and took lots of pictures and sent them home so they could see us in America ... showing off a country that would never be ours’ (Bulawayo 245).

Typically, the reader is tasked with reconsidering links between such reflections, particularly given the emphasis on photographic ‘capture’, and those earlier ones suggesting a latent critique of the desire to freeze-frame a supposedly postnational Zimbabwe for the benefit of oft-voracious Western consumers. Similarly, when seen in relation to what I have argued to be a prominent ‘diaspirant’ register throughout some of Obama’s most revealing pronouncements on twenty-first century America, the notion of qualified immigrant appropriations, suggested by the familiar tension between ownership and dispossession, assumes greater significance. When reconsidering Obama’s sense that ‘more minorities may be living the American dream, but their hold on that dream remains tenuous’ through the lens of *We Need New Names*, Bulawayo foregrounds the ways in which such ‘minority’ precarity is intensified in the truly postnational context of a seemingly interminable ‘war on terror.’ (Obama, *Audacity* 243). Her decision to centre this around the figure of Darling’s cousin TK is once more suggestive: ‘[a]fter TK was sent to Afghanistan, Uncle Kojo was fine at first, and then he wasn’t. Now he has this thing about traveling, about being on the road; whenever he gets behind the wheel, it’s like he wants to discover America’ (Bulawayo 258). By suggesting how a quintessentially U.S. endeavour is conceived from the perspective of migrants and the descendants of migrants entangled in these military misadventures, Bulawayo estranges all too familiar ‘road-to-ruin’ and/or ‘roadmap for peace’ tropes.

For Alikei Varvogli, 'to undertake an American road trip is to be already solidly, unambiguously American in ideology and allegiance' (Varvogli 125). While Varvogli makes these remarks with reference to Mengestu, I transpose them to suggest Bulawayo's intervention is ambiguous at best in its exploration of an American ideology and allegiance that relies on founding pioneer myths. The above citation is one of the novel's most jarring and conceptually generative precisely because the road and its cultural connotations are destabilised. In what Pease calls 'the official doctrine of American exceptionalism', taking to the open road still suggests the possibility of liberation and renewal (Pease and Kaplan 23). What Darling's Ghanaian Uncle Kojo really wants, yet ultimately fails to escape, however, is the existential and political discovery that, through the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, America has proved itself other to the version and vision he, as prospective diaspirant, invested in. This once more recalls Darling's mythic inflations in *Paradise*. Such reflections, dependant as they are on those originary, American-Adam discourses of exploration and settlement, bid us to reconceive the romantic rhetoric relied on by Obama as he embarked on his inaugural road to the White House: '[in] the unlikely story that is America, there has never been anything false about hope ... Yes we can. It was sung by immigrants as they struck out from distant shores and pioneers who pushed westward against an unforgiving wilderness' (Obama, *Change* 212). In a Conradian inversion that recalls Obama's reflections on reading *Heart of Darkness*, *We Need New Names* shows how his declaration can be reconfigured (Obama, *Dreams* 102). Some of the latter's most penetrating moments question the extent to which striking out 'against an unforgiving wilderness' is no longer a road taken through exclusively national imaginaries, but one that hopelessly entangles and is hopelessly entangled by those on and from 'distant shores.'

When reflecting on the ways in which his first presidential campaign exposed him to ‘the faces of [a] new America’, Obama composed a checklist of labourers for whom the material rewards of diasporancy remained largely out of sight: ‘[e]verywhere I went, I found immigrants anchoring themselves to whatever housing and work they could find, washing dishes or driving cabs or toiling in their cousin’s dry cleaners ...’ (Obama, *Audacity* 260). As Bulawayo and Mengestu explore the ways in which these modes of anchorage are precarious, Ndibe also borrows from Obama’s inventory to reframe the road as trope, as well as its associated myths, to explore the politics and poetics of postnational dislocation. As Allfrey’s overview suggests, Ndibe’s decision to orient his novel around a frustrated taxi-driver with an economics degree assumes greater significance as the narrative develops. Equally crucial is the author’s own polymorphous identity as an academic, novelist, journalist and social commentator. As such, there is a self-reflexively satirical, if at times overdetermined play with postcolonial and transnational discourses throughout *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, the very title of which invites associations with Joseph Slaughter’s *Human Rights, Inc.* (2007). Such academic knowingness sets it apart from both *We Need New Names* and *How to Read the Air*.

The following exchange, between Nigerian protagonist Ikechukwu (reduced in the U.S. to ‘Ike’) and friend Usman, sets the stage for the novel’s interrogation of those diasporant discourses foregrounded throughout Obama’s speculative attempts to ‘reclaim the American Dream’. As Ikechukwu comes to terms with his thwarted desire for social and economic advancement, Usman looks to bolster his flagging spirits by reminding him that,

‘The good thing is, you’re a talented young man. America offers great opportunities ... There’s no place in the world where people like us have it better ...’

‘We’re supposed to be living in this new global setting – a village, many call it. In college, I took classes where the buzzwords were ‘synergy,’ ‘hybridity,’ ‘affinities,’

‘multivalency,’ ‘borderlessness,’ ‘transnationality,’ whatnot. My sister lives in Onitsha, near my village, but she has Internet access. A gallery somewhere in this city buys and sells deities from Africa and other parts of the world. Many American companies are selling stuff to people in my village. They’re certainly selling stuff to me, to lots of people who speak the way I do. But I apply for a job and I’m excluded because of ‘my accent,’ quote, unquote. It’s worse than telling me outright I’m a foreigner, I don’t belong. Then academics rush to theorize me into an exile.’ (Ndibe, 54-55)

While not invoking ‘postnationality’ directly, this could and perhaps should be added to those signifiers which, through a process of academic evisceration, are disabling for Ikechukwu. In light of the ways in which I am suggesting all three texts can be framed using writing on or by Obama, his exasperation also echoes Obama’s frustration when he was taught by Edward Said, who casts such a significant shadow over postnational debates in both American and more identifiably postcolonial contexts (Remnick 113). In the above passage, Ndibe shows how our very conceptions of global marketplaces have been irreversibly altered by the kind of mediascapes and technological innovations surveyed in *We Need New Names*. Linked to this, there is the latent suggestion that discourse itself circulates in something akin to a postnational space, risking fossilisation as it navigates ‘an increasingly frenetic global field of transmission and consumption’ (Krishnan 134).

The above exchange frames the novel as Ikechukwu struggles to come to terms with the implications of the antiquities dealer, Mark Gruels’ sense that ‘in a postmodern world, even gods and sacred objects must travel or lose their vitality; any deity that remained stuck in its place and original purpose would soon become moribund. Deep down, Ike felt it was a lot of mumbo jumbo, fanciful but meaningless ... Still, he made it serve’ (Ndibe 62). The enduring sense is that the very terms of the discourse, particularly when distorted through the



postcolonial/postmodern conflation decried by Said amongst others, are (re)produced by a general vacuity that leaves the dominant order of things (cultural, ideological, affective and economic), untroubled. Abani suggests one alternative to this conceptual cul-de-sac when describing his work as ‘in many ways post-national and global not only in its reach, but in its attempts to locate a very specific African sensibility without attempting to limit it with certain kinds of arguments about essentiality and so forth’ (Goyal and Abani 229-230). If this reach/specificity dialectic informs novels such as *Graceland*, as well as Abani’s short fiction ‘Coming to America – A Remix’ (Oboe and Bassi 117-121), it also underpins the discursive drama that unfolds at strategic points throughout *Foreign Gods, Inc.*. Comparing and contrasting the Usman exchange with Gruels’ declaration, for instance, the reader shifts from a position where Ikechukwu believes he can resist hollow labels, to one where he finds himself left with little alternative but to embrace them, however ‘fanciful’ and ‘meaningless’ they are. When seen in relation to the kinds of globalized ‘choice,’ whether consumer or ideological, heralded at points throughout *The Audacity of Hope*, Ndibe is equally strategic in revealing its spectrality, particularly from the perspective of those living certain kinds of immigrant story in ‘hyperdrive.’ As the narrative develops, and Ikechukwu’s aspirations to sell stolen god Ngene for an exceptional profit rather inevitably unravel, he is forced to confront the reality that he is akin to the very foreign gods who, in this postnational marketplace, are ‘not the inventory they used to be. They’ve gone cold’ (Ndibe 322).

As Ikechukwu attempts to define his dual African and American nationality returning from Nigeria to the States, he rubs up against the Saro-Wiwa-esque ‘big grammar’ of border and customs officers. The comparative reader moves from the realm of actual conflict over the Nigerian/Biafran (post)nation in *Sozaboy*, to a postnational, if not post-notional, situation where contemporary battles are staged at passport control via the kinds of pronominal, and ultimately taxonomical, tussles dramatised by Bulawayo. Such negotiations also chime with

the omni-pertinent sense that ‘to decide who can move and who should not is ... gradually becoming one of the contemporary hallmarks of sovereignty’ (Oboe and Bassi 8). Another of these gauges of sovereignty, which can also be read as a variant of ‘big grammar’, is mastery of the English language itself. As such, Darling’s sense that ‘English is like a huge iron door and you are always losing the key’ is transposed in *Foreign Gods, Inc.* through a figure who, despite the kinds of educational achievement heralded by an Obama administration coming to terms with its obituary, still finds himself, both literally and figuratively, driving along a road that may ultimately lead nowhere (Bulawayo 197). As in so many diasporic novels, therefore, the most significant checkpoint is that set up to police what Maria Lauret calls the ‘linguascape’ (Lauret 20. See also Walkowitz 2015). Seen in terms of the metacritical concerns that inform Ndibe’s novel, this privileging and regulation of linguistic traffic is powerfully illustrated in the following: ‘[a]ll he could think of was the word “accent.” It was as if the very name of America could be formed with those six perilous letters ... He’d tried, but failed, to coax his tongue to roll around English words in a fashion acceptable to that strange animal called corporate America’ (Ndibe 270). The very kinds of migrant precarity foregrounded by Obama above are here translated into the exceptionally perilous notion of the U.S. as nation. This is a vital counterpoint to embedded notions of Nigeria, be it post-dictatorship or set against ongoing battles with Boko Haram, as postnational. As attention to what is ‘lost in translation’ haunts *Foreign Gods Inc.*, so it is also a preoccupation shared across *We Need New Names* and *How to Read the Air*.

Another of the barometers Ikechukwu uses to determine how ‘soft’ he has become, as a ‘returnee’ living too long in America, relates to the explosion of Nigerian interest in basketball. The fetishization of sports stars is a peculiarly twenty-first counterpart to the exoticisation of African gods and carvings in one of the many, often ironic, inversions of those colonial and postcolonial gazes that dominate both Ndibe’s novel and *We Need New*

*Names*. The following, for instance, pivots around a suitably anonymous because branded youth: “[t]he Hilfiger youngster spoke first. “I want to be like them.” He spread his arms in an expression of largeness. “They’re paid bags and bags of dollars. Just for throwing that ball through a hole” (238). Whereas, Darling and her friends give flesh to their diaspirant dreams through footballing icons such as Didier Drogba (see, for instance, Tar Tsaaio in Newell and Okome 275-293), in *Foreign Gods Inc.* the ‘road to success’ motifs that dominate Obama’s rhetorical landscape come to life on the basketball court. This in turn provides a stage upon which the dramas of these globalized entanglements play out.

While the prism of sport enables Ndibe to distil a host of diaspirant concerns, it also demonstrates how the alluring dream of American relocation assumes absurd and poignant significance. This dialectic is amplified when it straddles the kinds of generational divides central to contemporaneous novels such as *Ghana Must Go* (2013) and *Americanah* (2014). Ndibe offers his own supplement to this: “[t]he gray-haired man let out a dreamy gasp. “If I find my way to America,” he said, “no more trouble. I know a dibia or two who can arm me with the right charm. Everything I throw up will go in that hole” (Ndibe 239). As with Bulawayo’s splintering of Darling’s American dream through the ‘house of planks’ chronotope, Ndibe’s hole motif suggests the significant risks of diaspirant overinvestment. This assumes greater urgency when placed in dialogue with Bulawayo’s titular sense that we need new names when it comes to such debates. In their distinctive ways, therefore, both novels urge readers to resist a conceptual hollowing out of terms such as ‘postnational,’ by asking us to think about how and why the nation as paradigm persists. They do this by putting such concepts to work in discursive contexts that push beyond those reliant upon often hegemonic archetypes of ‘Africa,’ be they eschatological (Bulawayo) or exotic (Ndibe). When read from a perspective that accounts for the kind of discursively self-reflexive energy that propels the most suggestive aspects of Ndibe’s narrative, the reader might reappropriate

Gruels' sense that 'in a postmodern world, a god that didn't travel was dead' for more enabling ends (Ndibe 169). In turning to the final example from my textual triad, I reconsider how Dinaw Mengestu answers this call by also invoking and reorienting familiarly American, Obama-sanctioned tropes of reinvention throughout *How to Read the Air*.

#### On the Road (Again) – Roots, Routes and Reinvention in *How to Read the Air*

As suggested by Syjuco's synopsis, Mengestu anticipates the postnational tensions of *We Need New Names* and *Foreign Gods, Inc.* by creating a counterpoint between the experiences of protagonist Jonas, one of the American-born second generation, and his parents, who relocated to the States from Ethiopia via Sudan in the sixties. In a crucial intervention that provides a conceptual scaffold for my analysis of *How to Read the Air* as African **and** American novel, Varvogli maintains,

'[t]hese two parallel narratives emphasize a dynamic, rather than static, conception of space ... The story of [Jonas'] parents is one of wanting and trying to become American. His own, by contrast, is one of unravelling his American identity, of trying to weave narratives that help him to understand that to feel an exile, a dislocated person, a man of no country, is also a way of being American' (Varvogli 128).

If Varvogli's attention to dislocation and exilic conditions recalls the theorising parodied in *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, as well as Obama's self-fashioning throughout *Dreams from My Father*, her privileging of 'a dynamic, rather than static, conception of space' provides an alternative way of interpreting Mengestu's contribution to the kinds of postnational debates recalibrated by Bulawayo and Ndibe. Specific clues are given in her final emphasis on 'being American.' Varvogli foregrounds the manner in which all articulations of identity, be they individual, familial, national or postnational (as signalled by 'to feel ... a man of no country, is also a way of being American'), are inextricable from what Achille Mbembe, with a particular

focus on the black experience, has called ‘the struggle of becoming’ (in Bassi and Oboe 29). In so doing, Varvogli also gestures towards the conceptual tools needed to reconsider the dialectical process of ‘being African,’ particularly when viewed through familiarly postnational tropes of displacement. In what follows, I supplement Varvogli to explore how Mengestu restages these against an American backdrop.

By imagining a host of African spaces from the perspective of a figure whose professional identity is bound up with his work at a refugee reception centre, Mengestu amplifies some of the preoccupations of Bulawayo’s novel in particular. Jonas’ reflection on the ways in which he and wife-to-be Angela distribute their itinerant charges, for instance, foreshadows those Afropessimist discourses that inform the rules of Darling’s ‘country-game’: ‘we began to divide up our clients between the west side and east side. We split the Africans first since they were the easiest. Benin, Togo, the whole western coast down to Namibia, and even large chunks of northern and central Africa went to Angela, from the Congo on west, which was fine, I said, because I had Somalia, “and no one wants to fuck with them”’ (Mengestu 20). As in *We Need New Names*, Somalia is metonymic of postnational dissolution. Of greater significance, Mengestu’s decision to orient his novel around a figure for whom the fabrication of narratives, as well as an (over)investment in the politics of narratology, becomes a peculiarly American and, I argue, specifically Obama-era obsession. Jonas hones the inventive, if not inflationary skills he will transfer to college classrooms in the asylum centre, where he embellishes various accounts to make them stand out in the testimonial vetting process. In a move that recalls some of the intense critical debates surrounding Dave Eggers’ *What is the What*, another diaspora text variously concerned with representations of the Sudan and the U.S. as postnational iterations, the reader is told,

the not so persecuted tended to ramble and digress and include statements such as “It’s been a dream of mine” or “The opportunity to pursue ...” There was never that sort of wishful thinking in the others – a cold, almost hard pragmatism was the rule of the day ... Often there were statements such as: The village, city, town, country I came from was born in, lived in for forty-five, sixty years was taken over, occupied, bombed, burned, destroyed, slaughtered, and I, my family, my sister, cousin, aunt, uncle, grandparents were arrested, shot, raped, detained, forced to say, tortured to say ... In the end the consequences were always the same, and each ended with a similar emphatic note: We, I, can’t, won’t, will never be able to go back. (Mengestu 24)

While this appears a fairly conventional rendering of the often-formulaic templates used to plot traumatic experiences, the significance of Jonas’ meditation is more multifaceted. Seen ‘as the literary type in the office, with my background in literature and my supposed desire to get my Ph.D’, Jonas’ foregrounding and supplementing of certain recurrent narrative tropes invites the reader to make more enabling, because dialectical connections between American and African spheres of influence, in the interests of those dynamic conceptions of space (and self) advocated by Varvogli (Mengestu 26). She fleshes this out when stating that ‘while insisting on his own Americanness, Jonas also becomes an African story-teller’ (Varvogli 119). As the reader works their way through the novel, however, it becomes increasingly clear that the literal and figurative authority Jonas has over refugee testimonies, as accounts of national atrophy, is contrasted with the various aporias of his parents’ lives. We are once more charged with making provisional links between these early reflections and Jonas’ frustrated hermeneutics, as he tries to come to terms with those shadowy, because withheld, parts of his parents’ story. As the narrative develops, we come to appreciate their suspicion of full disclosure, as well as how this defines their precarious and largely unhappy union. If these aporias enable some of Jonas’ most indulgent flights of narrative fancy,

particularly when spinning tales of apocryphal Africa to his all-too-willing students, there seems to develop something like a willingness to let certain provisional, because inherently postnational truths be, peppered as they are with intractable gaps, silences and absences.

In light of this, Varvogli's story-telling formulation is conceptually generative as it can be turned on its head. When Jonas tries to anchor himself, however precariously, in a sense of postnational, second-generation Ethiopian identity, he situates himself in a long line of quintessentially American story-tellers, for whom the language of reimagination and reinvention is sacred. It is vital, for instance, that, as an antidote to all-encompassing Afropessimism, the migrant testimonies associated with rambling, digression and wishful thinking are those in thrall to equally vacuous discourses of U.S. exceptionalism. This returns time and again to 'dreams' and 'opportunities'. These touchstones are, of course, prevalent throughout Obama's more diaspirant inflected writing and speeches. This is shown in his conclusion to *The Audacity of Hope's* 'Race' chapter where, assuming the rhetorical baton from Martin Luther King Jr., he declares that, when it comes to children of different backgrounds, 'America is big enough to accommodate all their dreams' (Obama, *Audacity* 269).

To consider how these novels might encourage us to transpose Gene Jarrett's notion of Obama's 'transnational sensibility' into a postnational realm, we must analyse the distinctive manner in which Mengestu dramatises the complex, often painful dynamics of the father/son relationship (Jarrett 182). As the reader delves deeper into the novel, there is a growing appreciation that, to differing degrees, both representatives of the older and younger generations enact that archetypically American preoccupation with inventing and reinventing the self through narrative. It is particularly telling that Jonas directly associates the respite of fiction with the (post)national narrative and/or imaginary of the United States, rather than the oral or otherwise shape-shifting of a predominantly East African lineage. As Varvogli

maintains, '[the act of storytelling] emphasizes not only the discursive nature of identities, personal and cultural alike, but also the central place that storytelling occupies in constructions of American ideologies' (Varvogli 123). Enabling as this observation is, I supplement it by suggesting that, in an appropriately postnational manoeuvre, Mengestu is as preoccupied as Bulawayo and Ndibe (and in a similarly ironic and/or parodic manner) with the processes by which stories about 'Africa' come into being, circulate and are consumed. This is captured in the following, as Jonas reflects on spinning stories for his students:

Not only was I good at these inventions, I was grateful for them; only in fiction could I step outside of myself long enough to feel fully at ease ... I thought of this as a distinctly American trait – this ability to unwind whatever ties supposedly bind you to the past and to invent new ones as you went along ... I strayed on occasion into darker ground, if only to make sure that I held their interest ... They fell hard for anything that sounded like that, and were quick to imagine the missing details on their own. They assumed war first, hunger and poverty second ... Africa was everywhere in the news and the pity for it and its inhabitants had spiked a thousandfold as a result ... throngs of people gathered around a stage wearing the names of the dead, while at the same time celebrities across the country thoughtfully called for an end to genocide ... My students were naturally infected. (Mengestu 104-105)

The final foregrounding of 'infection' is particularly charged in terms of the mediatised suffering that serves as a transnational appendage to what Obama has called a U.S. 'empathy deficit' (Obama, *Audacity* 67). Jonas' privileging of the media's pivotal role recalls everything from the iconic images of the AIDS crisis to the Ethiopian famine that sparked Live-Aid. If we are invited to consider the personal and political resonance of the latter for Mengestu, the real significance of this passage is Jonas' adherence to the kinds of Afropessimist, West-as-Saviour narratives demanded by his all-too-willing, and therefore



willingly complicit, students. In light of the argument pursued above, however, it is even more imperative that the reader resists conflating author and narrator.

Those moments at which Jonas reflects on his regurgitation of archetypal narratives of an 'Africa' defined by stasis rather than the movement heralded by Obama in his 2015 A.U. address suggest the urgency of revision and/or subversion. This corresponds with Varvogli's crucial point about the manner in which the novel's contrapuntal form demands that we entertain more dynamic visions of postnational space and selfhood, when it comes to both African and North American continents. It also resonates with Krishnan's assertion that '[p]erforming Africa need not be a singular act, but rather one which, both globally-mediated and locally-modulated, encompasses multiple spaces, audiences, frames of reference and histories' (Krishnan 171). The kind of African and American rather than African-American dialectical relationships and negotiations I see at work in all three novels is suggested by the following. As Jonas thinks back on the ennui he feels reading those variations on African atrophy captured in the asylum testimonies he edits, the reader is invited to put these in invariably contested conversation with his father's mythical portrait of the U.S. decades before: 'I felt tired suddenly reading them again, and I knew that this was how much of the country felt as well. We were straining to break our hearts. My students had all but admitted as much when they said they wanted to save Africa and that millions were dying. Without such a grand scale it was impossible to be moved' (Mengestu 137). A more genuinely transnational, because trans-temporal dialogue emerges as we appreciate the extent to which Jonas' rhetorical loyalty to the static discourse of postnational dissolution carries the traces of his father's projections of the United States as promised-land.

As the following suggests, the hearts of this older generation were strained to breaking point in a peculiar way that also sought faith in certain visions and versions of a mythic sanctuary suggested by anywhere but home: '[w]hen it came to Europe and America,

men supposedly hardened by time and experience ... were susceptible to almost childish fantasies. They assigned to these faraway lands all the ideals of benevolence and good governance lacking in their own, because who among us doesn't want to believe that such places exist' (Mengestu 252). When seen through the lens of existential reconstruction, be it individual and/or collective, it is the Fanonian failure of certain African nation-states to imagine themselves beyond the colonial prescription that precipitates these kinds of postnational exodus: 'after independence, many nations failed to evolve, let alone reinvent, a discourse that would reconceptualise or redirect nationalist fervor towards a more equitable society' (Ngaboh-Smart 148). In light of the above, this privileging of 'reinvention' is crucial. Ngaboh-Smart's critique, however, resonates with only one strand of *How to Read the Air*. In it, the logic of both father and son is challenged at a metacritical level as Mengestu asks whether we are willing to tell and then have the capacity to listen to different, more dynamic, unsettled and unsettling kinds of postnational story. This is particularly pressing in an era when the global supply of and demand for narrative(s) can seem so prescriptive.

Some of the most poignant and politically incisive of Mengestu's interventions on attempts to negotiate a passage through various postnational spaces, both East African and North American, take the form of parodic one-liners. They invariably defamiliarise a Western notion of sovereign selfhood from the perspective of an African arrivant: "[t]he first step to being an American," a friend of [my mother's] father's had told her shortly before she left Ethiopia, "is to act as if you know everything. The two most important words in the English language are 'of course'" (Mengestu 193). If this resonates with those preoccupations with passing and/as assimilation, be it linguistic, religious, economic or cultural, so central to scores of diasporic novels, Mengestu adds depth and dimension by framing them differently. In a manner that recalls while also departing from the visions sketched by Bulawayo and Ndibe, the road and its diaspirant associations assume singular importance in Mengestu's

second novel. We are confronted with these loaded images from the outset. As Jonas attempts an imaginative leap of faith in a bid to empathise with his mother, his reflections on the aporia that defines her own understanding of her errant husband's experiences in the States prefigure the kind of frustrated hermeneutics that will dominate the remainder of the narrative:

She never knew what her husband had gone through in the three years they had been apart, nor had she every really tried to imagine. Say America enough times, try to picture it enough times, and you end up with a few skyscrapers stuck in the middle of a cornfield with thousands of cars driving around. The one picture she had received during those three years was of him sitting in the driver's seat of a large car, the door open, his body half in the car, half out. (Mengestu 6)

When read in the light of postcolonial and/or postnational fixations with liminal positions and interstitial identities, Mengestu's final image assumes added power. This comes from capturing a feeling of migrant (in)security through that most American of tropes: the car. In what comparative readers might see as a reimagining of the suffocating thing around her neck of Adichie's eponymous collection (2009), Mengestu uses the image of the seatbelt to speculate how Jonas' mother might have given form to her feelings about the sanctity, or otherwise, of a dislocated life: '[t]he belt, clasped around [my mother's] stomach, became for her a confirmation of the simple fact that in some places, life did indeed matter, and deserved careful, deliberate protection' (Mengestu 63). In this one sentence, Mengestu arguably collapses the space between many of the novel's central concerns, which in turn speak back to the voluminous discourse on precarious lives, as well as taxonomies of experience and suffering. As we work our way through the text, however, it becomes increasingly clear how and why the supposedly simple facts of American life, metonymically captured by the securing seat-belt, come close to snapping. These tensions once again supplement those of

Bulawayo's and Ndibe's novels by reframing the mythic place of the road and road-trip through a post-9/11 lens which, in turn, alters the terms of certain diaspirant dreams. In so doing, all three texts engage with the epochal debates set out in *Arab Detroit 9/11*: "[p]ost-9/11" is now universal shorthand for the age in which we live, but what this period will mean in American history and how it should be interpreted are matters still open to dispute' (Abraham, Howell & Shryock 2).

When taken on a boat-ride by Bill, Jonas' boss at the refugee centre, the immigrant 'clients' follow an alternative route to those earlier generations of émigrés who would have passed through Ellis Island. The scene therefore chimes with recent revisionist scholarship (see, for example, *American Dreaming, Global Realities: Rethinking U.S. Immigration History*, 2006). In a manner that resonates with those post-9/11 representations of New York in texts ranging from Amy Waldman's *The Submission* to Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, the hegemonic gaze that looks upon 'Africa' as the locus of political dissolution is destabilised, if not inverted, through the eyes of those looking for American icons conspicuous by their absence: '[the clients] had never seen the Twin Towers except in photographs and in highlight footage of the buildings as they were burning and preparing to fall. Most stood on the deck wondering just where exactly they would have been' (Mengestu 30). As it anticipates Darling's photographic desire to capture some sense of American solidity for her friends back home, it also plays with Obama's post-9/11 assertions. While relying on 'trans' rather than 'post'-national paradigms throughout *The Audacity of Hope*, for instance, it is revealing that he couches this sense of 9/11 as conceptual watershed in the following terms: '[as] a consequence, we would have to act differently, understand the world differently' (Obama, *Audacity* 292). At the end of his time in office, debates continue as to whether this change of administrative perspective, if not practice, has come to pass. To return to the Mengestu passage, however, of arguably greater significance is the implicitly parodic

treatment of an avowedly Western sense that media footage from the global South results in emotional fatigue and/as overload. This once more suggests the ways in which each of these texts interrogate the ‘failure of geographic imagination – a kind of superpower parochialism’ evinced by certain strains of U.S. popular, as well as political culture (Nixon, 240).

The enduring feeling that certain versions and visions of America are as transient as burning buildings and ephemeral as smoke is also used to bridge what appear to be temporally-discrete experiences of dislocation throughout *How to Read the Air*. As with his most recent novel *All Our Names* (2014), Mengestu’s decision to offer a Midwest counterpoint to New York and Chicago distinguishes it from some more conventional representations of a diasporic, because urban, imaginary: ‘[p]erhaps, she thought, this was the way everything in America actually was – all smoke and mirrors, with only illusions of grandeur. It was hard if not impossible to really know anything when you were stuck in the middle of it, and that was precisely where she was, right in the middle of the country’ (Mengestu 149-150). As is the case in all my chosen novels, Mengestu invites the reader to make imaginative interpretative connections. If the union of Jonas’ parents is a study in matrimonial disharmony, his mother’s sense of the States’ illusory grandeur assumes greater poignancy and piquancy when compared with Jonas’ attempts to try and imagine what his diaspirant father must have felt setting foot on American soil for the first time.

While reflections such as these correspond with enduring debates about the futility or otherwise of Obama’s attempts to resuscitate various American dreams, it is enabling to explore a final triumvirate that links concerns with diaspirancy, dreams and disease and/as dis-ease throughout *How to Read the Air*. In terms of the relationship between Jonas and Angela, both figures defined by alternatively frustrated experiences of displacement, New York seems to hold out the prospect of very cosmopolitan, class-specific sanctuary. In light of the diaspirant paradigm I have attended to throughout, Jonas’ self-definition is multiply

revealing: '[w]e began to think of ourselves as a black power couple in a city full of aspirants, the kind who would someday vacation for an entire month in the summer and whose children would attend elite private schools like the academy with the tuition paid full in advance' (Mengestu 59-60). While this urban negotiation seems antithetical to the middle passage travails of earlier generations, Mengestu suggests a peculiarly twenty-first century supplement to the kinds of slave discourse relied upon by now-canonised African-American authors. For Ali Mazrui, these include 'diaspora black people, such as Barack Obama and Toni Morrison, [who] are Africans of the blood (racially black), but are no longer Africans of the soil (they are now children of the diaspora instead)' (Adebajo 47). As a child of what Paul Zeleza identifies as the 'contemporary Diasporas' rather than the 'historical' ones (Zeleza 108), Jonas associates and regurgitates the familiar triptych of dream, faith and destiny, emboldened by the hopes of educational advancement dashed in *Foreign Gods Inc.*: '[i]t was part of [Angela's] faith that this was one of the only ways that we could secure a bright and happy future, and in that regard she was no different from the immigrant parents I had known at the center who were convinced that the only thing that would save and protect their children in America were advanced, specialized degrees' (Mengestu 106). As Jonas seeks to forge a postnational bridge between the domestic and the foreign, the personal and the professional, the American and the African, so he draws on the hegemonic logic of a diaspirant class fixated on the desire and need to protect.

As we negotiate the contrapuntal passage above, it also becomes clear that Jonas, a Nick Carraway-esque drifter searching for something to cling to if he is not to be castaway once and for all, does not wholly subscribe to this (di)aspirant order of things. It once more falls to the reader to make provisional connections between figures divided by generational and invariably geo-political experience. When read in the light of Jonas' anachronistic reflections, his sense that his father's U.S. dreams were dominated by boxes assumes added

poignancy. In wrestling with that enduring question of what the U.S. can be made to signify, which dominates so many postnational discourses, we are told, '[m]y father had been dreaming of boxes since coming to America, and he hoped that this trip might end those dreams, which despite his best efforts had continued to haunt him ... His life had been made and unmade by boxes, and what he felt toward them could only be called a guilty obligation, one that hung hard and heavy around his neck ...' (Mengestu 42). The comparative reader might once more forge a link between this final image and Adichie's short stories. If, therefore, reflections such as these operate as variations on the familiar theme of migrant lives imagined as forms of entrapment, the following description of dementia as disease, resulting in profound familial dis-ease, might also be productively reimaged through the lens of postnational discourse:

If anyone knows what it's like to feel the world around you collapse in its entirety, to fully know that everything that stands before you is a mere illusion, and that the so-called fabric of life is in fact riddled with gaping holes through which you can fall and still be said to be alive, then it was my father at that moment ... this was how my father must have sounded thirty years earlier, when he first arrived in America with less than a hundred words to his name and no past or future tense to speak of. (Mengestu 158)

The inclusion of 'illusion' recalls Jonas' mother's meditations on America, in turn corresponding with Mengestu's enduring concerns with the forces that might hold and console us, on individual, familial, national and, perhaps most poignantly, postnational levels. It is yet another instance where, interpreted both creatively and critically, the reader is tasked with considering connections between East African and North American spaces. When read in relation to Jonas' later reflection that '[v]iolence had made, and to an equal degree when I was older and separated from it, unmade, my world' (Mengestu 187), the influence of Elaine

Scarry's *The Body in Pain* can also be felt. In the face of invariably overwhelming violence or physical degeneration, at both intimately personal and broadly political levels, the familiar impression is that our very ways of making sense of the world start to fray, in a manner that recalls Jonas' fabric of life image. If the dialectic between constitutions of micro body politics and the macro body politic is all-too-familiar, however, his description once more seeks to narrow the distance between himself and his father's experiences when he first arrived in the States. The latter's precarity is once again imagined through the prism of the 'linguascape', which prompts more radical investigations of the contemporary revenants of 'the coercive Americanization of migrant cultures over most of the twentieth century' (Lauret 4). In terms of how this might relate to postnational discourses, however, it is the sense of falling through, yet just about surviving, the Ndibe-esque holes in competing conceptions of America that seems most crucial. If large portions of *How to Read the Air* explore the extent to which a postnational sense of American exceptionalism betrays itself as, at best, a contested signifier, at worst a hollow one, Mengestu's Obama-esque foregrounding of the relationship between a fabric of the self and the idea that every act of storytelling is a performative fabrication assumes greater importance. This once more invites us to reframe Mengestu's almost parasitic reliance on the road motif as a way of exploring the poetics and politics of narrative itself.

Much of Jonas' unreliable narration is charged by tensions between a desire to know his parents' back-story, whilst wanting to self-consciously distance and detach himself from it, them and what he believes they represent, figured as a contested form of national longing once more. In the wake of his father's death, for instance, Jonas offers a retrospective justification for the alienation he felt when he was alive: '[e]ven before my father died we had no claims left on each other, neither he to me as a father nor me to him as a son ...' (Mengestu 155). He is later compelled to acknowledge, however, that 'I was still carrying



traces of my father with me' (Mengestu 175). Given the coverage of his attempts to make inroads into his parents' story, it is left to the reader to map and measure the traces that link father and son, as well as the generations they represent. As such, the benefits of taking circuitous, often subterranean routes through the narrative, as pondered by Jonas, becomes a metatextual comment on our own hermeneutic strategies, particularly when it comes to imagining and reconfiguring postnational discourses: 'it's true, you never know what you might find along these quieter back roads' (Mengestu 293). This is echoed when, following his final, painful parting from his mother, Jonas hits a different kind of road to the one taken by his parents decades earlier: 'I avoided most of the highways and tried as much as possible to stay on quiet semi-obscure back roads' (Mengestu 319).

While this paper has been preoccupied with the now canonised dialectic of roots and routes, it is fitting to conclude with Mengestu's image of semi-obscure back roads. By attending to three Obama-era novels, all of which I see as intervening in and refining ongoing debates about both African and American postnational spaces, I have sought to re-route some of this discourse by considering what the benefits of taking the road-less-travelled might be. In their distinctive ways, I suggest Bulawayo, Ndibe and Mengestu all share a desire to dislocate (as a way of relocating) some of the central preoccupations of contemporary literary studies, be they postcolonial, translocal or postnational. As with their fiction, I hope to have unsettled some of these more prescriptive debates, suggesting the necessity of putting them to work through travel so that they reflect the dynamism of what President Obama in his 2015 address to the African Union called, perhaps idealistically, an 'Africa on the move.' My sense is that *We Need New Names*, *Foreign Gods, Inc.* and *How to Read the Air* illustrate the ways in which, as Spivak suggests, 'literature cannot predict, but it may prefigure' (Spivak 49). I hope to have joined my fellow contributors to this special issue by prefiguring, rather than predicting, some of the discursive futures of postnational literary studies.

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